Congress vs Media

For sixty years the Congress Party at the Centre and in the states has demonstrated an inclination for media repression. C.S.H.N.MURTHY on its record of intolerance.

Posted Saturday, Oct 27 21:23:01, 2007

Over 60 years of independence the Congress Party□s record on media freedom has been far from impressive. And it continues to notch up black marks for itself. Both the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance at the Centre and the Congress-run Government of Andhra Pradesh at the State level have something in common: their intolerance of the media.

When you put it together, the current government□s record is impressive. First the temporary bans on TV channels for misdemeanours. Fashion TV and Live India this year, MTV last year. Also a ban this year on two denim advertisements. Then there was the registration of cases against the Aaj Tak TV Channel for its sting operation Duryodhan under provisions Section 12 of Prevention of Corruption Act, of course apparently on the advice of the Parliamentary Committees (of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha) which probed into the scandal ((http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com, July 3, 2007).

And then last month the bulldozing of a part of the world famous Ramoji film city (www.eenadu.net 8th Sept, 2007). It sometimes seems as if the Rajasekhar Reddy Government is competing with the Centre in this regard. Earlier this year the latter tried to bring in a circular (G.O.NO. 938, Feb 26,2007) as a result of the decision taken in a □Media Watch□ meeting presided over by none other than the Chief Minister himself. This empowered the State Information Department officials and the Heads of various Departments to initiate criminal proceedings against media which was reporting rampant corruption on all fronts in general and in respect of specific projects which government considered as most prestigious and vote-pulling ones. When the issue of circular came to the notice of the media, they opposed it in one voice and the Chief Minister had no qualms to speak a white lie on the floor of the Assembly, which was in sessions then, stating that it was issued by mistake and without his knowledge (.http://www.hindu.com/ Feb 27, 2007). But subsequent efforts by the media and the primary opposition leaders of TDP, who used the Right to Information Act to know the force behind such a move, revealed that the Chief Minister was not only aware of it but also approved the draft copy of the circular by affixing his signature on it.

Among the news papers and TV channels published from Andhra Pradesh, it is the *Eenadu* and the ETV combine which did more to expose the rampant corruption cutting into the quality and vitals of these projects (Yellampalli, Pulichintala, Devadula, etc.). Thousands of crores of rupees pumped into these projects were siphoned off and shared among by the politicians, officials and contractors who in turn fed a small part of it to naxal leaders too.

It was *Eenadu* and ETV which together brought out the large scale corruption that led to the illegal leasing out of lands to M/s. Obulapuram Mines Corporation M/s

Brahmani Steels, M/s. Trishul and Ms. Raghuram Cements. Mr. J.C.Diwakar Reddy, the Panchyat Raj Minister is the owner of Ms. Trishul Cements whereas Mr. Jagan, son of Mr. Rajasekhar Reddy, the Chief Minister of the State, is the owner of Ms. Raghuram Cements. To camouflage his own role in floating Ms. Trishul Cements, the over smart Cabinet Minister had adopted ingenious ways to hoodwink the media and got the registration of the company done with his driver, watchman, manager of farm, servant-maid, helper, etc as the company□s Board of Governors which smacked of the ulterior motives of the Minister in the whole deal.

However, the Government of Andhra Pradesh on its part, instead of taking a serious action against the Minister, has in an equally undue haste leased out 1600 hectares of land for mining out the limestone for Ms. Trishul Cements. That the Minister, who also owns a Travel Agency by name Diwakar Travels, (which cuts into the income of State owned Transport -APSRTC) and often indulges in bullying the officials of the APSRTC at corporate level from going ahead in purchasing new buses to expand further notwithstanding, acts always in a manner self -servient to promote his business interests in a highly volatile and faction ridden Rayalaseema is conveniently glossed over by Rajasekhar Reddy as these two leading arch rivals and factionists of Rayalaseema came together to work in a cabinet for the first time in the history of Andhra Pradesh.

Further it is *Eenadu* group which brought to fore the corruption and nepotism behind the realignments of outer ring road which was meant to clear the traffic congestion on Shamshabad highway where international air port is coming up soon (Government adds Outer Ring Road issue to CBI, 29 Sept 2006). Aside from Rajasekhar Reddy□s own confession in the Assembly that he possessed Government assigned land to the extent of 3000 acres, which of course he said that he would surrender soon (Reddy□s clarification on land holdings), it was the Chief Minister□s own brother and Member of Parliament Vivekananda Reddy□s illegal encroachment on the land of a Gurukul trust at Ghatakesar or Rangareddy district, meant for a social cause, that the *Eenadu* group exposed, causing great consternation and embarrassment to the ruling Congress. (BJP leader raps State on land transactions).

In the last three and a half years Congress rule, since August 2004, Eenadu and ETV have been exposing nearly 200-250 cases involving corruption, nepotism and unlawful activities of the MLAs down to Village Sarpanches of Rajasekhar Reddy□s government annually (Unpublished collected data based on news paper reports). In almost all such exposures, the Government of Rajasekhar Reddy had ordered either routine enquiries or constituted special inquiry committees. About 90% of them were found to be having some truth, including the ones as latest as laying faulty pipelines and broken pipe lines for Yellampally canals (www.eenadu.net Oct 16-17,2007), in the preliminary investigations conducted by the Government though these investigations found certain differences in the reports filed and presented in the Media.

In reality, most of the reports filed by Eenadu and ETV were also reported by other news papers such as *Andhra Prabha* (*New Indian Express* Group), *Andhra Jyoti, Vaarta* (Sanghi Group), *Deccan Chronicle* and *Andhra Bhoomi* and other news channels such as TV 9, Teja, Jemini, MAA, etc. In fact some of the stories reported by *Eenadu* on issues like Puppalaguda land hand over, Outer Ring Road realignments, M/s Obulapuram illegal mining, etc were taken cognizance of by Andhra Pradesh High Court which even in its rulings stated that there were prima facie valid reasons to believe that some shady and illegal things indeed occurred. Appropriate instructions stalling such operations were also passed.

Upset and flustered over the manner the dirty linen of his government unleashed into public domain, Rajasekhar Reddy has developed vindictive attitude towards media in general and against two news papers *Eenadu* and *Andhra Jyothi* among others□which according to him were main culprits and were responsible for all their tirade against his government (Political: YSR once again Fires at □*Eenaadu*□ and □*Andhra Jyothy*□ Tue, March 07, 2006; http://www.justandhra.com). He went on reiterating that either consciously or unconsciously neither he nor his government has ever committed any illegal thing though more than a dozen pronouncements of Andhra Pradesh High Court found fault with his government□s decisions beginning with Gouru Venkata Reddy□s release (Apex court stays release of 1,500 Andhra convicts: http://www.tribuneindia.com Aug 16, 2007) to outer ring road realignments. . In the process, he even stooped so low as to spread patent lies against *Eenadu* describing it as a paper that gloats in anti-congressism and against dynastic rule of Nehru-Indira family. He cited one of the Ramoji Rao□s affidavits filed in the High Court of Andhra Pradesh in particular context (not linked to his government) as a support to this statement.

Having put up with such canards spread against Eenadu and ETV by nonetheless Chief Minister himself, Ramoji Rao a couple of months ago came up with the Telugu version of the original affidavit, purported to be filed in the High Court of Andhra Pradesh, on the front page of *Eenadu* nailing Rajasekhar Reddy□s for his white lies against him(www.eenadu.net □This is the Truth, Yours is a white lie□, July 25,2007)

The beleaguered Chief Minister Rajasekhar Reddy, amidst intensifying attacks in the media against by-now□omniscient corruption of his government, has unleashed a vituperative counter offensive against media as the best strategy. The policy quite explicit here is □□If you attack me, I attack you□. Firstly he attacked Margardarsi Financiers and Chit funds on flimsy grounds, and later attacked the world□s famous Ramoji Film City, which was virtually being demolished. In both the cases however, the Andhra Pradesh High Court had come to the rescue of Eenadu group.

This is a typical Congress mindset reminiscent of Indira Gandhi□s era (Mankekar DR and Mankekar K, 1977). During the 60 years post independent era, the media both the broadcast and print had been subject to so much of subjugation and harassment (Narinder, 1976; Narasimhan VK, 1977; White Paper on Misuse of Mass Media during the Internal Emergency, 19977) Firstly broadcast media had been put behind the iron curtain which had badly hindered the growth of the electronic media though Radio and TV had the genesis in India around the same time in the West (Robin Jeffrey, 2006; Zivin, 1999, S.Ninan, 1998). Because of the paranoia and phobia of the Congress leaders against granting autonomy to these two vital media, Indian electronic media had to wait for liberalization till 1991 when it became a compulsion rather than a choice. Between 1947 and 1991, the media□print and electronic sustained a number of attacks on it in various varieties of forms some of which include even regulatory bills apart from laws of censorship and draconian emergency (Everett M Rogers and Arvind Singhal ,2003) of 1975-77.

Most of these attacks against media were based on personal vendetta of Congress leaders against particular media like *Indian Express* or *Eenadu.* It was at one time Indira versus *Indian Express*. Later it was Rajeev versus *Indian Express.* But what the Congress leaders -- whether Priyaranjan Das Munshi or Rajasekhar Reddy -- have quite conveniently forgotten is that all actions of media fall under the article 19(1) of Indian Constitution□freedom of speech with a riding clause article 19(2). No separate legislation is needed to tackle problems arising out of misuse of this sacred fundamental right. The existing Civil and Criminal laws are adequate

enough. Yet, camouflaging the vindictive agenda, holy dialogues were spelt out to bring forth a □regulatory bill□.

The State cannot act as an individual whereas media□s freedom of speech is well within the meaning of individual□s right to freedom of speech. Media□s freedom thus apparently implies the freedom of its founder who is also incidentally acting as Chief Editor. Since the time of pre-independent era, many founders of the news papers that carried crusade against the British rule were editors themselves though they might have employed editors other than themselves in view of the bulk of work involved in news making. In this regard the responsibility of the State cannot be as knee jerky as an individual reaction is. The Government has to do this delicate task in a dispassionate manner well within the frame work of law.

But the Congress leaders are once again reverting to their age old convictions apparently not willing to learn any lessons from the past. By banning some advertisements□such as Lux Cozi and Amul Macho underwear (http://www.indlawnews.com 26 July 2007), or banning a couple of Television Channels □MTV and Fashion TV or by ordering Live India channel to go off the air for one month for a silly sting operation, the Congress led Government demonstrated that everything is all right with its governance and it is the media which needs correction all because its sting operations and reports inconvenienced its Members of Parliament and Assemblies.

But, it is otherwise. What moral Code of Conduct the Members of Parliament have either to the Parliament or to the nation for that matter? What Code of Conduct the Members of Legislative Assemblies across the country have for their State as well as the Assembly? What is the popular perception of the people across the country towards these highest democratic bodies of governance? What Code of Conduct governs the constitution of Cabinet chosen by the Prime Minister?(Held to Ransom: Editorial of the Hindu. Sept 12, 2007, Missing Parliament, Indian Express,Sept 12, 2007; Quality at Rs 500 a day? By Yamini Aiyar). Stating □compulsions of coalition governance□ many meaningless laws were enacted (office of profit, salary bills, OBC reservation Bills, SEZs Bills, etc) and the corruption and malpractices of Members were swept under the carpet. Even Judiciary□s integrity has touched its 60 years low.

In fact time has come now for any government whether at the Centre or at State to pursue and encourage an open policy approach to curb corruption and promote good governance by inviting media to adopt a proactive approach towards corruption which has become a number one curse for this nation. It would help the governments to get to the bottom of the truth. Since the government machinery is unable to perform such a larger task, let this be left to □watchdog□ function of media itself. There could be a couple of instances or a marginal percentage of errors in media□s anxiety to promote good governance free of corruption (□Some stings in Public Interest, says Judge.□ *The Times of India,* Sept 16, 2007). These are as much □compulsions of booming media economy□ as much as the government and judiciary try to vindicate themselves of their lapses or failures or corrupt deals due to one reason or the other.

But to stifle and throttle media in the name of □code of conduct□ or a □regulatory bill□ camouflaging personal vendetta is least reflective of any □code of conduct□ of the Governments itself-be it at the Centre or at the State.

Note:

Andhra Pradesh is the fourth largest state in India and has been a stronghold of Congress for long. But for the intermittent spells of Telugu Desam rule, the State

has always sent maximum number of Members of Parliament from this party.. In the elections held in 1977, the AP State had sent 41 out of 42 Members of Parliament when the Congress witnessed a rout in the North. Even today, the Government of Manmohan Singh is largely dependent on the major chunk of 30 MPs elected from the State of Andhra Pradesh.

Beyond the State of Andhra Pradesh, the presence of Congress at this time is fairly nominal. Thus the paper considers the State of AP a natural connect between the North and the South in terms of analyzing the attitude of Congress towards media.

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